

# **RENT**

**A Proposal for Staging**

By Gibson DelGiudice

Ars Pro Concreta

Copyright © January 11, 2018

## I. ARTIST STATEMENT

### *The Show*

*Rent* was so many things to so many people. It was the first musical in decades that younger audiences really identified with, one which spoke in their voice and gave a platform to their concerns. And all of this happened in spite of one thing: a dead author.

After seven years of workshops and re-writes, *Rent* was scheduled to open in previews off-Broadway at New York Theatre Workshop, on January 25, 1996. But composer / librettist Jonathan Larson had been feeling ill. He'd been to two hospitals; one diagnosed him with food poisoning, the other with the flu. The night before the first preview, after a great final dress rehearsal, Larson went home, put a pot of water on the stove for tea, collapsed, and died of an aortic aneurysm. After his death, as previews began, the artistic team found themselves trying to figure out what Larson would have changed and what he'd have kept working on. They went through his notes to see what he'd still been unhappy with, and did their best to make decisions they thought he'd have made. Unfortunately, when Larson died, the piece was frozen in amber. Who knows what he'd have done during previews while it was still Off-Broadway?

It's hard not to argue that whatever he'd have done might have paled in comparison. This story of impoverished young artists and musicians struggling to survive and create in New York City's Lower East Side, in the thriving days of Bohemian Alphabet City, under the shadow of a deadly disease, became the runaway success of the Nineties. *Rent* won four Tonys, six Drama Desks, two Theater World Awards, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The original Broadway production ran for 12 years, grossing over \$280 million and spawning several national tours, international productions, and a film version in 2005 featuring most of the original cast members.

### *My Background with the Show*

As a "rock musical," *Rent* followed in the tradition of shows like *Hair* that used popular music of their respective time periods within the context of an established musical structure. Larson himself, when he was walking *Rent* around to potential producers, had described it as "*Hair* for the '90s," a label many enthusiastic critics (the *New York Times* bloke among them) would come to adopt as well. So perhaps it's not too surprising that I got into *Rent* around the same time that I was discovering *Hair*.

No question there were more than just passing similarities: both were rock musicals that blended many contemporary sounds despite that catchall label, and made frequent use of the "list song" style of lyric. Both were snapshots of a specific era's counterculture and its conflict with the establishment of the day. Both portrayed the adventures (and misadventures) of a group of young people who have strained relationships, at best, with their parents; both groups included well-meaning activists with confusing or unconventional love lives, nerdy misfits who want to make movies, and an undercurrent of unrequited love, among other common elements. Both were frank in their discussion and portrayal of sex, drug use, poverty, so-called alternative

lifestyles, and other social issues, and used what some consider profane language in both lyrics and dialogue. How could an extroverted sexually confused teenager resist?

The older I got, however, coming into the fandom late as I did, the more disillusioned I was as *Rent*'s status as an important piece of art devolved from musical wunderkind to frequent punchline. And my starry-eyed fantasies of chasing an artistic dream began to fade as I grew to sympathize more with Benny than his scrappy vagabond ex-friends. I tired as well of Michael Greif's staging, once iconic but now a stage picture that leaned so heavily on its Nineties origins that it didn't work as well outside that context.

I had hope for productions like *RENT Remixed* in the West End or the 2011 Off-Broadway revival at New World Stages. Where the latter was fruitful, if mundane, the former was disastrous, with the score reworked to the point of unrecognizable<sup>1</sup>, an incredibly white-bread cast... as someone who enjoys gutsy, ballsy, out-there interpretations of a piece, I wanted to like the idea, concept, and staging, but it was only super fascinating in terms of how much it missed the mark. Still, at least they tried to do *something* with the material instead of just plopping down the same tired-ass production.

I hope I can do the same, albeit more productively. I wanted to challenge myself to create a production of *Rent* that I wouldn't feel embarrassed to put my name on. I wanted to rekindle my love for the piece. It may never be perfect, but at least it'd be the best job I could possibly do. And I'm pretty sure I've done so with this.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Highlights" included opening the show with "Will I," an "Out Tonight" that resembled a burlesque number from *Cabaret*, and "What You Own" as a piano ballad for Mark.

## II. PLAY ANALYSIS

By and large, *Rent* is not nearly as flawed as people believe. It's a rock opera about a community celebrating life in the face of death and AIDS at the turn of the century. If one expects perfection, especially given the circumstances under which it was created, they're in the wrong theater. Countless fans have opined that they find *Rent* better for its roughness and imperfection, more accessible and loveable for its flaws. The score alone deserves all the acclaim it got, and more. As no less a luminary than Stephen Sondheim pointed out, Larson was "attempting to blend contemporary pop music with theater music, which doesn't work very well," but "was on his way to finding a real synthesis."

Having said that, sadly, not being nearly as flawed as people claim it is doesn't mean the show isn't flawed. It's not impossible to figure out *Rent*'s problem; namely, the show's been in "first preview shape" since its first performance.<sup>2</sup> It's clearly the creation of someone very talented, but there's a lot in it that doesn't really work, clear dramatic and structural problems that never got the chance to be addressed.

Studying the show and its history, it becomes clear that unfortunately, *Rent* was *always* a big mess. Its first several incarnations were so full of ideas, of everything Jonathan Larson wanted to say, that no one could make heads or tails of it. There were so many themes he wanted to explore, so much of his wide-eyed optimism and naiveté that he wanted to inject into his story, so many plot lines. His early depiction of homeless people was borderline offensive. Too many of his characters were one-dimensional. And the specter of its source material, Puccini's *La Bohème*, was always getting in the way. Compounding the issue, Larson could be very defensive, closed to outside feedback. It wasn't until director Michael Greif (and dramaturge Lynn Thomson, and several others) entered the picture that a coherent story began to emerge, and Larson opened up and listened to what they had to say as he began to trust them.

But he died, and so he left problems unresolved. In spite of its many flashes of brilliance, the "final" show is overwritten, with far too much plot and far too many characters. Not enough winnowing and separating wheat from chaff had begun at the time Larson passed away. Without a surviving author, there's not much one can do about that. The good news is, whenever I had a question, I had something to which I could turn; a valuable resource that'd prove useful in detangling the show, something that's surprisingly never been tapped in all the time *Rent* was being re-developed.

In 1994, during its developmental phase, *Rent* had a brief run at the New York Theatre Workshop, which starred Anthony Rapp and Daphne Rubin-Vega in the roles they'd later reprise as members of the original Broadway cast, and which introduced Greif to the project. A bare-bones transcription of that early NYTW version has been available [online](#) almost since the show premiered, along with the [audience recording](#) from which it was derived.

---

<sup>2</sup> For many musicals, the preview period is when the most important work gets done, and Larson died before previews began.

Much to my surprise, I learned a few things from that edition which might've answered the objections of the show's detractors. Indeed, I discovered purely based on discarded material that a couple of the show's overall problems, and more than one nagging plot hole that's been criticized since the day *Rent* opened, could be addressed – or at least camouflaged – *without* drastic script and score changes.

It was nice to find that *all* I had to do with *Rent* was smooth over the cracks in the plaster.

Ara Pro Concreta

### III. VISION

#### *Dramaturgy*

No one likes a back seat driver, but sometimes a director has to fill that role in order to grok an author's intentions. Luckily, when dealing with *Rent*, the problems are not nearly as hard to solve as they appear. For all its much-criticized issues, the book is actually fairly strong; it only takes a few minor adjustments to create a meal out of the ingredients we were left with.

For starters, the structure of another early version of *Rent* comes in handy to help mitigate the confusing shape of Act II. Pre-Broadway, post-workshop, there was a revision<sup>3</sup> that opened with "Seasons of Love" and part of "Halloween," and told the story as a flashback from Angel's funeral that then caught up to current events. I feel going back to that choice would make the script much stronger and help with structural problems Larson never got to fix. If the show really is "single frames from one magic night [...] on the 3D IMAX of my mind," it makes more sense that the story in Act II is so fragmented, as Mark self-edits some bad stuff, montages things, etc. In my production, much as in the film (although it lacks a formal intermission), Act II would open with "Seasons of Love B" to cue the audience back in to the story and remind us of how much has changed since the events of Act I, that most of the show is a flashback, before returning to Mark's memories that bring us up to speed, to the "present." In fact, once you know this info, you can almost read between the lines in the existing script that Jonathan hadn't finished revising the remnants of that structure out of Act II.

Having dealt with the non-linear timeline, a question of general chronological timeline (again, not unlike *Hair*) is also often raised. *Rent* is a bit of an anachronism stew, set in a weird pop culture void that combines elements of the 1980s and early-to-mid-1990s. On one hand, Angel shouts out *Thelma and Louise*, released in 1991, and Maureen directly references the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing ("a yellow rental truck packed in with fertilizer and fuel oil" was Timothy McVeigh's weapon), but on the other, there's still alarms reminding people to take their AZT every four hours. This phenomenon was already dated by 1992, when a new form of AZT came out that could be taken every 12 hours – no need for beepers.<sup>4</sup> Leaving alarms out of the picture, what makes the most sense? Taking the data points we have into account, the timeframe which makes the most sense is 1995, turning into 1996. Any earlier, such as 1994 and up, wouldn't account for the (admittedly tasteless, but that's Maureen) cultural reference.

The 1994 workshop version provides other clues to solving general problems. For instance, it addresses a question that keeps more mature members of the audience from sympathizing with the main characters to this day: why don't they just pay the damn rent? It's a valid objection. Because of the "final" version, people often characterize Roger, Mark, and some of the other leads as irresponsible, selfish, and immature. In particular, for many critics, Mark and Roger's refusal to pay Benny the rent is not the gutsy gesture the show seemingly perceives it to be. I've heard this rant many

<sup>3</sup> Oddly enough, this choice was also reflected in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion concert.

<sup>4</sup> I suspect this was partially the reason the film was arbitrarily set in 1989, a mistake that was called out by critics and fans alike.

times over the years, and sometimes been the source of it: "Do they deserve to live rent-free and job-free merely because they're struggling artists? It's not like they're any good. You really must suck as an artist when your inner monologue about writer's block is better than the song it took you all year to write; as for Mark, his big documentary is a slideshow of home movies! And... *and*... let's not forget that they're struggling artists *by choice*. Those self-absorbed, entitled twats could get jobs. In a pinch, the cheap ass-hats could move back home with their parents or at least ask them for money."

The answer lies, oddly enough, in the earlier workshop draft. In that version, Mark's mom signs off her voice mail at the top of the show not with consolation over Mark's breakup with Maureen, but with this cold dismissal: "Oh, and Mark / Your father got a call from Chemical Bank / I don't know how they got our number / but we meant it when we said that you're cut off / ...love Mom." Additionally, there's a message from "Dave" firing Roger, who has "left [him] without a bartender for the last time." Put that info back in the show, to some extent<sup>5</sup>, and Benny's rescinding his "rent-free" offer clearly can't have come at a worse time. It's one thing if they're "starving artist" poseurs with unrealistic expectations, but add in that Mark's family has cut the umbilical cord, and Roger lost his job (we're even allowed to sympathize – must suck to go back to being a bartender after half a year of withdrawal, not sure it'd be easy to avoid triggers in that environment), and there's no time or resources to scrape together a payment to ward him off, and suddenly rather than being a selfish gesture we're meant to interpret as gutsy, "How we gonna pay last year's rent?" becomes a cry of panic.

Little pieces of exposition like this could answer major objections or resolve plot holes, but they're missing in the final draft. I'd restore this material, and with good reason. Everything falling apart at once for young adults struggling with independence after having made some really big mistakes is much more sympathetic than what appear to be whiny brats pitching a tantrum. (When I finally saw a little of myself in Mark and Roger's situation, it turned *my* sympathize-more-with-Benny ass right the fuck around, and I think it'd do the same for others.) I honestly feel Jonathan would've figured that out and re-included this stuff had he lived. He might've been a suburban kid from White Plains, but he wasn't *that* out of touch. The other good thing about making changes like this is that it's not a reach; you'd be pulling from Larson's own writing to do it.

Last but not least, I'd like to tackle a divisive question. When it comes to pointing out flaws in *Rent*, there's one particularly egregious sin that even many of the show's fans have commented on. Of the ideas I suggest, I'm almost positive this is the one Larson's family would have the most trouble with, but I stand by it, if I hold the reins:

Mimi should die.

First of all, before *Rent*-heads line up to complain, I'm not the only one who objects – a major production in Belgium directed by future experimental luminary Ivo van Hove

---

<sup>5</sup> Mark's plotline is still somewhat implied in the "final" version. While his mother's portrayed more sympathetically as a stereotypical smothering Jewish mom, she seems to suggest discord between Mark and his father in one of her second act voicemails.

killed her off, and a regional American run got spanked by the licensing agent for trying to do the same. Secondly, having Mimi come back is thoroughly awful; it goes against all sense, feels like a cheap grab at a happy ending, and is an appalling betrayal of the "No day but today" message. "The show is about life, not death" is just not a valid excuse, and Jonathan Larson can haunt me about it all he wants.

The argument that her death goes against his message of "living with [...] not dying from disease" falls apart when one considers that loads of people in the show are "living with" HIV – and grappling with it, and facing the challenges, and receiving/accepting each moment as potentially their last – and not "dying from" it. Even if Mimi dies, we still see a positive, if layered, outlook on how one can cope with disease in the lives of Roger, Collins, and people in the support group, none of whom are "martyrs." Do their journeys somehow *not* matter? Everybody has their share of hardships, but they work through them with the help of their friends and each other. The same point is made.

Moreover, in 2018, it's no longer commercially necessary, as it may have been perceived at the time, to kill the LGBT character and let the straight character live because mainstream audiences prefer a comfortable or "safe" ending; if one dies, they both should. (Indeed, I've always resented the unspoken implication when I argue about Mimi's death that it's somehow okay that Angel dies. Here we are debating whether or not Mimi surviving "changed the conversation," when Angel was no one's definition of a victim and lived for each moment as much as anyone else and no one seems to question whether *their* death was necessary to leaving an impact on the audience.)

If one is careful and smart about positioning dialogue and using staging appropriately, one can stick to the text and score as written and still have Mimi die without damaging the show, or its message and potential, at all, and I intend to demonstrate that.

On a smaller note, newer productions have made changes that weren't quite necessary, but are more on the mark than many who were critical of them feel they were. For example, the summer 2011 Off-Broadway revival apparently dispensed with a segment focusing on a drug dealer in "Christmas Bells."

I see the point that Michael Greif (once again directing the show) may have been attempting to address: critics and patrons alike have criticized *Rent* over the years for its "glamorization" of the East Village in that era, and it's hard to disagree. Unless you were an upper middle class kid playing at captain edge lord, there wasn't anything glamorous about hookers and dealers plying their trade in Times Square, homeless guys in your face, car alarms crashing your sleep, crack babies, and wildings; there was a reason everyone who possibly could fled for New Jersey. And in that moment in particular, the portrayal of Mimi and her fellow junkies' addiction as they "jones" for a fix is absolutely cartoonish.

I might not cut the entire moment, but I would definitely reduce it in length to something more reasonable (maybe compressing it into the bit where Roger forcibly separates Mimi from the dealer), so the moment isn't dwelt upon nearly as much as it is in the show as written.



### *Casting*

In addition to the many thorny topics *Rent* addresses, the show is fundamentally about youth, and specifically about the then-current generation. The problem is that television, film, and theater have a long history, mainly for financial reasons, of casting mature performers to play younger roles. It's a necessary evil, and sometimes the youngest-looking actors actually pull it off.

When casting *this* show, youth is an element that should be emphasized, rather than making the same mistake as the film, which – barring a couple of newcomers – used most of the original Broadway cast for the leads. These kids are college age, some barely out of high school; to cite one easy example, Mimi apparently looks 16, claims to be “19, but old for [her] age,” and talks in “Happy New Year” of going back to school.

Further, youth is readily apparent in the attitudes of these characters who struggle with decisions like “selling out” vs. being true to one's art (with which most adults would have far less trouble), and who fantasize that packing up and opening a restaurant in the Midwest – forgetting they have zero experience in such a venture – would solve all their beefs with the city and with life in general.

Realistic casting would help to erase objections that partially arise from the same roles being played by performers who are now approaching their fifties.<sup>6</sup> It's easier to understand and sympathize – empathize, even – with a young adult who's got unrealistic expectations than someone who can't easily camouflage the fact that the show is part of their retirement plan with makeup.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Broadway cast members who crossed over to the film were mostly middle-aged at the time, and many reviewers took pleasure in pointing out how obvious that fact was.